

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000726

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SUBJECT: PERSPECTIVE OF SOME SHI'A WOMEN APPAREL INDUSTRY
WORKERS

¶11. (U) SUMMARY. Bahrain anticipates that the WTO-mandated end of textile quotas at the beginning of 2005 will cause its garment manufacturing sector to contract. The Ministry of Industry estimates that there are 3,600 conservative Bahraini Shi'a women working in this industry. There are few industries in which these Arab women are able to work limited by their adherence to conservative social mores. The loss of these jobs is politically salient considering an official 15 percent unemployment rate that already disproportionately affects the Shia' population. During April and May 2004, PolOff visited more than half of the garment factories and surveyed 150 Bahraini Shi'a female workers to gain insight into possible options for them. END SUMMARY.

THE FACTORIES

¶12. (U) At the start of 2003, there were 24 garment factories in Bahrain, employing over 13,000 foreign and 3,700 Bahraini workers, mostly conservative Shi'a women. In the last seven months nine factories have closed due to lack of orders and in anticipation of the WTO-mandated end of US textile quotas on January 1, 2005. The remaining 15 factories each employ anywhere from 250 - 1,200 Bahraini workers. The Ministry of Industry estimates that 3,600 Bahrainis still work in the industry. These factories manufacture clothing primarily for K-Mart, Sears, WalMart, JC Penney and The Gap. Textiles and apparel comprise 60 percent of Bahrain's total exports to the US. Most factories segregate its Shi'a female workers from the foreign male workers. According to the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry Textile Committee, over 90 percent of Bahraini female workers work in the finishing process, the lowest skill level of apparel manufacturing. Factories provide separate prayer/locker rooms for women. The monthly wage for 160 hours is BD120 (USD318). Workers do not receive private healthcare insurance but factories do make contributions for their pensions. (NOTE The GOB provides free healthcare to its citizens. END NOTE)

THE WOMEN...AND SOME MEN

¶13. (U) The 150 women interviewed range from 21 - 42 years old and are single or divorced. Most of them live in their parents' homes in nearby Shi'a neighborhoods. Ex-husbands of those who were previously married have custody of the children. Family size ranged from 6 to 12 persons. Unlike the older women, the younger ones do not contribute a large part of their salary to the family unit. The majority did not finish high school. Several of the older women lamented that they dropped out of school to support the family and had no possibility to obtain a higher education.

¶14. (U) Only a handful of women claim to make decisions independently and do not follow the guidance of husbands, fathers or brothers. To keep abreast of current events, most of the older women read the Arabic local newspaper "Al Ayam" and watch "Al Arabiya" channel television. The younger set used the Internet as its primary source of information and spend more than 10 hours per week in chat rooms. More than half of the women interviewed voted in 2002 Municipal elections. However, less than 20 voted in the 2002 national elections. Only one woman, 30-year-old Mousa, boldly stated that she would run for office, if she could get a higher education first. None of the women were members of NGOs or political societies.

¶15. (U) Unknown to both the President of the Textile Union and the Ministry of Industry Textile Affairs Representative, there are 11 Shi'a men who work in the garment industry. Their ages range from 18 - 24 years old. All of them are single, still live with their parents, high school graduates and members of the largest opposition society Al-Wifaq. They use the Internet and read the independent Arabic local newspaper "Al Wasat" for their main sources of information.

All who were eligible in 2002 (age 21) voted in both the national and municipal elections. A 23-year-old man named Ibrahim told PolOff on April 28 that he chose to work in the garment industry because he has aspirations of becoming a fashion designer. But Ibrahim is the exception to the rule. The others stated that they work to support the family. Eighteen year old Jassim said that it was important to keep busy and do something positive. Jassim told PolOff that so many young unemployed Shi'a men get into trouble because they have no where to place their energy.

THE UNION

16. (U) For the most part, factory management allows union representatives access to workers. However, the women interviewed unanimously view the textile union as not worth the monthly 500 fils (USD1.33) dues. At Continental Garment factory, the women workers designated five women to become union members and represent all of them. This group of five women fields all complaints and demands to the union. Workers described union activities at other factories as far less organized. The textile union has yet to bargain collectively with management on any issues. President of the Textile Trade Union Khadija Attiya told PolOff on May 12 that there are 250 dues-paying members out of a total of 12,000 textile workers. She claims that she has encountered some resistance from management to her efforts to recruit union members, and a couple of factories have forbidden her access to foreign workers. Even though the 2002 Trade Union Law allows foreigners to join trade union, none have done so. Attiya cited that foreign workers are afraid to join for fear of losing their jobs and/or being repatriated. She has not heard of any factory management threatening repatriation or loss of jobs. She also admits that she has little support from the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions. Attiya told us that she needs support and more training.

THE ISSUES

17. (U) The majority of women cited naturalization of Arab non-Bahrainis as the main issue facing indigenous ethnic Bahrainis, alleging that naturalized Sunni Yemenis and Syrians take finishing and sewing jobs away from Bahrainis. The second most important issue was sectarian discrimination against the Shi'a. All agreed that housing is scarce and the cost of living is rising. However, they also acknowledged that women rights have greatly expanded.

OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE - THE WORKERS' VIEWS

18. (U) Very few Bahraini women purposely chose to work in the apparel industry. Many asserted that they work at an apparel job because it earns the higher end of the "minimum wage." When asked what they would like to do if the apparel industry did not exist in Bahrain, only a handful thought they could be re-trained to become a secretary or an accounting clerk. Several said that they would like to receive more education and pursue careers in nursing and teaching. However, the overwhelming majority could not conceive of working at any other job.

19. (U) COMMENT. The WTO-mandated end of textile quotas could cause several hundred conservative Shi'a women to lose their jobs. The loss of these jobs is politically relevant considering the high unemployment rate that already disproportionately affects the Shi'a population. Unemployment is a main bone of contention between the GOB and the opposition. In addition, the end of textile quotas and the possible effective date of US-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is January 1, 2005. The FTA could be blamed for job losses resulting from the end of quotas, causing a public relations nightmare for both the USG and the GOB. In order to mitigate the impact of the loss of these jobs, this issue will merit serious attention from the GOB, business community, the union and NGOs. END COMMENT.

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